

Enviro s took so long, St. John s appeal hearing is continued to Jan. 20-23, 2004

By Liz Anderson

Two environmental groups, appealing the Water Quality Certification granted by the Department of Natural Resources for the St. Johns flood control project, concluded their expert witness testimony Friday before Administrative Hearing Officer June Doughty.

Although the entire hearing was originally scheduled for last week, the environmental testimony went so long, Ms. Doughty continued the hearing to January 20-23 to hear presentations from the Corps of Engineers and local residents.

At the conclusion of that hearing, she will make a recommendation to the Missouri Clean Water Commission concerning the permit that DNR issued months ago.

Environmental Defense, with Tim Searchinger, senior attorney, led the environmentalists' presentations last week.

That organization and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, chartered in Illinois but with headquarters in St. Louis, are appealing the DNR's conditional water quality certification granted for the project.

Testimony during the week, according to the coverage by Terry Ganey, Jefferson City Bureau Chief of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, included allegations that not being able to flood the floodway with backwater from the Mississippi River would increase the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

During cross-examination, according to Ganey's story Wednesday, the expert, hydrologist Christopher

Woltermade, who is an earth science professor at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, said that in justifying the project, the corps had undervalued the nitrogen-filtration properties of the floodway.

He further acknowledged that he had made no independent assessment of the floodway's value but was relying on other scientists' reports. He said the floodway's contribution to taking nitrogen from the river was a small one and that preserving the floodway as it is would not eliminate the dead zone.

Other testimony during the week alleged that the Corps' economic analysis is flawed and it would not produce enough agricultural benefits to justify the cost of the project.

Of the nine "experts" called, the majority had never been to the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway, one had spent two days locally and two had spent a couple of hours here.

Also according to at least one of Ganey's articles, East Prairie is in the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway, and the gates will be closed most of the year, giving the St. Johns Levee and Drainage District the opportunity to pump water almost year round.

OPINION:

As we said last week, either much of the testimony is non-factual, or Mr. Ganey didn't get his facts straight.

In the meantime, the Corps of Engineers is still acquiring necessary easements and rights of way to begin construction next summer.

Contact the Memphis District if you have potential mitigation land for the flood control project.